**Matthew 18:1-20 September 6, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew the 18th chapter here re-reading these words. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Back to school. How many years has it been since you’ve been back to school? The school day can sometimes be a roller coaster of emotions. You think about a day in middle school or high school that starts at a low point, you’re tired, you’re ornery, you’re sleepwalking into class, but then you see your friends, you’re excited, you’re energetic, you get to go to gym class, or study hall, or your favorite class and you’re up, you’re ready, you’re having a great time. You then head to your next class and there’s a pop quiz on the material you didn’t study the night before. That’s the plunge of the roller coaster. Up one minute, down the next. There is nothing more sobering and serious then being told to write down specific answers on a blank piece of paper, and you have no idea what they are. You know you’ve failed. It’s a horrible feeling. But then you shake it off, it’s just one grade, you go to lunch, they’re serving your favorite meal, you’re back up again, things aren’t so bad, you’ll get em next time. You finish the day, you go to practice, you’re doing well, all in all it’s been a good day, you go home, you walk through the door, you call out for your parents, and they’re already sitting in the living room. They were waiting for you. They don’t say anything except “take a seat”. With them is a pastor from a local church. You were up, you were down, you were up, and now it’s like the day has always been in a state of seriousness. It’s like you can’t remember the last time there was something lighthearted going on in your life, because they have to tell you something so serious.

Perhaps you have experienced these kind of dramatic shifts in your own life. Moments when your day went from light and joyous to tense and serious all in an instant. It’s a startling feeling, and it immediately sobers you up to focus on the task at hand, and to deal with the situation in front of you.

This morning, we’re attempting to go back to your childhood, to remember songs that you may have sung in a Lutheran school or that you sang in Sunday School when you were being taught the basics as a child. These songs have a lighter tune, and are easy to sing. But despite thinking of them only as “children’s songs” the words hold the teachings of a very serious subject. For example, verse 8 of our Canticle Song “I Love to Tell the Story” “I love to tell the story, although it’s hard to tell, of how our Lord and Master Faced pain and death and hell. Dear Jesus, whipped and bleeding was hung upon the tree, and died on that Good Friday to save both you and me.” And in our closing song, “Brothers and Sisters in Christ” in verse 2, “Man walkd alone and in need, without faith, hope or promise or creed, wandering aimlessly lost, unaware of the staggering cost.” This is very serious language, it can take you from singing a happy song and smiling, to really thinking about these words, and being brought low due to the reality of sin.

And in comparison to other texts that we have looked at in the Gospel of Matthew, this text gives a very serious tone. Jesus speaks about the very serious nature of sin and its relationship with our Father in heaven. Jesus speaks of those who tempt, or as the Greek Word gives a more proper emphasis “scandalize”, young ones and how it would be better for them to be drowned in the depth of the sea with a millstone tied around their neck. He goes on to talk about how it would be better for you to pluck out your own eye, than enter the hell of fire with two. And that if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, you should cut them off, rather than enter eternal fire, with two.

This is serious language. This is not a lighthearted response to sin, but a very serious tone when we talk about the ramifications of breaking God’s Law and disobeying God’s Commandments. And the truth is, we need this type of reminder. We need to hear about the fires of eternal torment, and the reality of the punishment of hell, because too often in our lives we turn a blind eye to our blatant disobedience, or we have a sort of joyous or aloof nature when it comes to sin.

It’s easy to just blame our culture, our world, and the “changing of the times” upon our own behavior. Sin in itself is a punchline for many. We hear people say in a joking tone that they are “going to hell” after doing something horrible, but not showing any remorse for their actions. Sitcoms give false morality lessons of just “do your best and it will all work out” and even an “ends justify the means” sort of thinking. God is portrayed as an absentminded babysitter who looks down at the kids once in a while but just makes sure that nothing serious has happened. Man is pretty much given the benefit of the doubt and allowed to do whatever they want as long as it makes them “happy” or as long as they aren’t hurting anyone else. Right and wrong is decided upon by popular opinion, the voting of politicians, the decision of judges, and even just the mood of certain people that day. Sin isn’t serious. Telling someone something is a sin and wrong is serious, and seen as wrong. How dare someone tell someone else to stop doing what is making them happy. How dare you stop the party, and the fun, and make everything so serious.

Yes, it’s easy to blame our culture for the way we act, but sadly, it just doesn’t matter in the eyes of God. For as Paul says in Romans 12, we are called to present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. And to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. And we have been taught the truth, we have grown up knowing the truth of God’s Word and the Law of Moses, written down on the 10 Commandments, and explained further in Martin Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism. There’s a reason we read the 10 Commandments together here in the service of Prayer and Preaching. We haven’t forgotten them. They haven’t just gone away. The writer of Hebrews, gives us serious and sobering words in chapter 10. “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.”

No, to blame our culture and the world, and those around us who gladly give in to sin without a second thought is just a cop out. We think lightly of sin, and we take advantage of God’s grace in our lives. We cheapen God’s grace by not recognizing the serious danger of unrepentant sin. We do not think of sin as drastically as Jesus speaks of it here in Matthew 18, if we did we would not live our lives the way we do. But instead, we continue in the sins that we know are wrong, and give up the fight against them. That attitude leads to apathy. Apathy toward sin, apathy toward God, and apathy towards salvation. For how could God truly love, a sinner? How could God forgive someone, like me, again, and again, and again, for the same things? Sin leads to despair and hopelessness. A pit so deep that we cannot pull ourselves out of it. A depression that continues until our lives are gone.

Sin is serious. Jesus makes that perfectly clear. The Bible makes that perfectly clear. Sin is a serious disease of ourselves and this world and therefore, to be saved from sin, we must put down our own strength and our own understanding, and simply rely on the Goodness, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. We must be made humble, as humble and reliant as a child, in order to be saved, from the serious destruction of sin. Jesus makes this perfectly clear when speaking to Nicodemus in John chapter 3, “Unless one is born of water, and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus speaks the same way in Matthew 18, Our Gospel lesson this morning, saying “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” A child, is born, not of its own power, but the complete and total work of their mother. A child, is humble, it must be defended from other dangers and even from itself. It must be nurtured and taught.

That is why Jesus gives such a harsh warning against those who would scandalize others to sin. For death by drowning would be better than the eternal torments of hell. That punishment is reserved for the devil, known as the tempter in the Bible, who constantly comes to us and tempts us with the lies that, “You **can** overcome sin on your own”, and that “You have the strength to destroy such a terrible and horrible plague upon this Earth.” That punishment of hell is reserved for those, who wish to bring God’s children along with them to destruction. But it is not meant, for us. It is not meant for us because we, are precious to God. As precious as a newborn child. As precious as a lamb is to its shepherd. We are so precious to God that He would do anything to save us from sin. And instead of inflicting the punishment of sin upon us, His children, instead of plucking out our eyes, cutting off our hands, and our feet, making us experience the whip of the Roman soldiers, the pain of being nailed to a cross and hung to die, He allowed that pain to be given, to His own Son.

God gave, His own Son, into death, for you. For your sins. He willingly forsook his own Son, for you, His child, so that you would not have to experience the punishment of sin. So that you would not have to feel the eternal flames of hell. So that you would not have to die eternally but instead that you would be given, the crown of life. To live, in joy and happiness, and the presence of God Almighty, for all eternity. That is his love. His amazing and unbelievable love. It’s something that is serious in that we’re talking about life and death, but it also is so simplistic it can be taught in the words of lighthearted songs. “He’s got the whole world in his hands, he’s got you and me brother, in his hands.” “Here brought together by grace, we are gathered as friends in this place.” Or as we’ll sing at the end of our Canticle Song, “The love of God the Father, the Spirit and the Son has given us salvation The free gift Jesus won.”

That love, can get you through the serious moments of this life. It can bring comfort in the midst of tragedy and sadness. It can transform your minds, and defeat the skeptics and the liars of this world who only hope to drag you down with them into the pit of their own sadness. I shared that story of a young man who’s day went from light and joyous to serious, because it is an example of how quickly life can change. And how serious life can be. But in the midst of the tragedies of this world, and the changes that come, life is ours not because of our own power, but simply given, as a gift. We rely upon God for our comfort and peace, just as a child does with their parents, to care for them, provide for them, and love them without end.

But a parent’s love for a child doesn’t mean that the child will always be happy or that the child will live a carefree life without any moments of stern correction and discipline. The absence of discipline, would mean an absence of love. For love means preparing a child for what they will face, and equipping a child with what they will need. We are as humble as children when it comes to salvation, and the gift of salvation is ours, but until that time we are equipped by God, to go out into this world, with the gifts of His Word to guide us, and the Sacraments of His love to forgive us our sins and strengthen our faith.

This is not an easy task, and it cannot be done on our own. We need the support of our Brothers and Sisters in Christ. We need to rely upon God in those situations, to speak through us, and to use us as His instruments. In conclusion this morning, I want to share the words of C.F.W. Walther when he speaks about the joy of the Gospel. We all are saved by God’s love, His love that sent His Son into this sinful world, to suffer for us and die in our place to earn for us eternal life. And that truth of the Gospel is what Walther is writing about in these words. “The Gospel issues no orders, but it changes man. It plants love into his heart and makes him capable of all good works. It demands nothing, but it gives all. Should not this fact make us leap for joy?” May the joy of the Gospel keep you grounded always in God’s love through the serious times of your life and the war against sin.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.